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Teaching Online: Lessons in Change

What We Are Really Changing by Moving Education into Online Environment?

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TEACHING ONLINE – LESSONS IN CHANGE
What we are really changing by moving education into online environment?

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ABSTRACT
Regional accreditation of Jones International University (JIU) - the first entirely virtual university accredited by the US regional accreditation agency - sparked heated discussions in academic circles. Concerns about changing roles of academia and faculty were countered with unbinding enthusiasm for the new teaching opportunities.

This presentation uses notes form the 5 years of active online teaching at Jones International University as a base to examine what is changing in teaching, faculty roles, student responsibilities and collegiate culture when we decide to deliver education through a network of computers.

KEYWORDS
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INTRODUCTION

> It appears, based on archeological records, that people learned before we invented classroom. We have -- sometimes -- learned in them. I would hypothesize that we will somehow learn when the classrooms are no longer around. The question, of course is what we will learn.[1]

This statement by John McDaid names the central theme of my presentation. Based on the experience of five years of active teaching and administration at Jones International University (JIU) -- the first fully online, regionally accredited university in the United States -- I will attempt to outline changes to teaching and learning processes that happen when online environment replaces face to face classroom.

After a short introduction of JIU's teaching model I will focus on the following four questions.

1. How our teaching practices change when we teach online?
2. How does the role of faculty change in online environments?
3. How do the students' responsibilities change in online classrooms?
4. How do we change our collegiate culture by creating online universities?

JIU HISTORY AND TEACHING MODEL

But let me start with a little bit more information about Jones International University (JIU). JIU was created in 1993. It started to offer courses in 1995. It is a private, for-profit university that currently serves over 3,000 students in 57 countries. In March of 1999, after a rigorous review process, JIU received regional accreditation from North Central Association of Colleges and Universities (NCA). JIU was the first fully online, virtual university to receive accreditation from the same agency that accredits such universities as University of Illinois, Regis University and other mainstream, traditional schools in the United States.

JIU uniqueness lies in the fact that it functions entirely online. It has no physical campus. It does not require face to face meetings for any of its courses or degrees. It uses fully asynchronous model of content delivery and it divides its faculty into two separate but equally important roles – content experts and teaching faculty.

- Content Experts are faculty who design JIU course content. They define learning outcomes, identify readings, and design assignments. They are recruited from among the top academics in a given subject area.

- Teaching Faculty are faculty who work directly with students. They guide students through the course content, provide feedback, grade students' work,

answer questions and lead online discussions. They are recruited from among the most talented teachers in academia.

Since JIU was a first fully on-line university to receive regional accreditation, NCA decision sparked a heated discussion among members of academia in the United States. This discussion brought to the surface some important points that we need to consider when we think about online teaching and learning.

CHANGES IN ONLINE TEACHING PRACTICES

Seven years ago when we started to design JIU programs, online teaching was young and not much was know about how it works. Traditional ways of content presentation, pedagogy, class management, learning assessment as well as traditional roles for faculty and students needed to be translated into online environments. Asking what are the qualitative changes that online education brings to teaching practices was the first step in this translation.

As we shortly found out, one of the most significant changes that online education brings to traditional academic processes lies in the fact that with the emergence of online universities people no longer go to school to get education, they receive education wherever they are. Students no longer need to adjust their lives to academic schedules. They can adjust time and place of education delivery to their own needs.

This anytime, anyplace model opens education up to a diverse group of students. This means that teaching through the Internet forces us to teach in mixed cultural and international settings. Traditional adult students are still a large part of JIU's student body, but a growing numbers of people who were not able or not willing to obey by the traditional schools' demands of time and space apply to our programs. Additionally, large numbers of international students come to online classrooms from many geographic locations. These international students participation is not mediated by the necessity to be physically present, and therefore to be at least minimally familiar, with the culture of the country and the university from where they receive their education.

As any students would, this diverse student body demands relevancy of what they are being taught. But how can we make what we teach relevant to everyone? How can we meet the need – very often expressed by JIU students - to apply what they learn to a broad variety of real life problems when these problems are faced by a diverse, non-traditional, truly international body of students?

One answer to this challenge is to open the teaching processes to student's control. In terms of instructional methodology it means that the translation of traditional teaching methods and materials into effective online tools should include design of open ended, interactive case studies, offering choices in

readings, assignments and practice exercises. Small-group, student led discussions will be successful online. Simulations and role playing exercises will work well. Interactive materials, debates and mock trials will result in students' increased engagement. In general assignments that allow students to choose topics and perspectives will help to relate what we teach to what students want to learn. Additionally, as anyone who thought online knows, it is imperative that online course content is kept fresh. Students, who have time to check things out, will quickly point out irrelevancy, outdated materials and resources.

What can we loose by focusing our education efforts on applicable aspects of knowledge? Unfortunately we can lose a lot. We can lose a concept of learning as pursuit of broad and pure knowledge. We can loose concept of learning as sheer intellectual inquiry and intellectual pleasure. We can loose a lot of traditional roles of learning used as mind expanding activity.

What can we loose if students take control over what they learn and how they learn? Again, we can loose a lot. Basics of education may not be covered if students do not find them relevant. More esoteric benefits of learning, such as intellectual discipline, reasoning skills, critical thinking, may not be sufficiently learned.

Do we need to make the trade off and choose effective, flexible education vs. quality of education? No, careful care for the quality of what and how we teach will add these more traditional educational topics to online programs. We need to keep coherence and context present in the overall design of online courses and programs. Through active teaching instructors can add affective domain and intellectual discipline to information based learning. This will of course require a lot of faculty engagement in online teaching.

In the increasingly open, student controlled environment of online classroom the role of faculty will be even more important.

CHANGES IN FACULTY ROLES

We would be foolish not to acknowledge that there is pedagogy embedded in online technologies that we use to teach.

For example, one of the most significant changes that occur in online teaching is the change in the role played by faculty. The faculty online is much less of the knowledge provider, authority and source of wisdom. The feedback we receive from JIU faculty consistently indicates that online faculty find themselves in new roles of students' fellow discoverers, knowledge facilitators and guides.

This shift in faculty roles is happening because traditional classroom is dematerialized in online environments. Synchronicity of education is no longer necessary and social concepts and institutional rituals connected with it are being

changed. With this change teachers core professional identity is being re-defined. [2]

Again, we need to acknowledge this change and use it to our advantage. It means that we should not insist on replicating synchronous face to face teaching online, we should translate it.

One of the strongest lessons from JIU experience is that synchronous methods of teaching are not the most appropriate for online teaching. As much as we want to pretend that synchronous chat sessions resemble class meetings - they really do not. A week long face to face meeting scheduled once a semester will not make much of a difference in the success of online program. In fact translation of such a meeting into an asynchronous mode may fit students' needs much better.

At JIU we took the lesson that asynchronous education is the correct mode for online content delivery even farther by dividing traditional roles of faculty into two complementary but asynchronous functions. Content Experts who are faculty responsible for designing courses are chosen for their research accomplishments, publications and excellence in thinking. They are charged with the design of the courses that are then implemented by Teaching Faculty. Teaching Faculty work directly with students. We claim that we use best faculty from both research and teaching worlds – an option that would not be possible without asynchronous model of course delivery.

There are other teaching related concepts that are changed by the online content delivery. In an online classroom human presence is mediated by text. Class participation shifts from speaking to writing. This brings up a major change to conversational, social aspect of learning. A long-standing tradition of school being a place and time allocated for talking may no longer be valid in the near future.

Online, asynchronous delivery of knowledge tends to increase modularization of the teaching units.

Asynchronous, online classroom also seem to foster the use of qualitative and self-assessment methods. Traditional ways of judging students' learning will need to be re-thought in light of these preferences. For example, all JIU exams are open book exams. Ninety percent of assessments used in our courses are qualitative assessments such as essays, research and position papers, online discussions, article reviews and group projects.

What do we gain through implementing all these changes? We empower students to take control over their own learning. I will talk more about it in my next point. Possibly, more insight into students needs will allow us to customize

our teaching, to encourage more student participation, more critical thinking and more questioning of knowledge principles.

What do we loose in asynchronous teaching? Eventually we may loose some of the traditional authority held by academic faculty. Some of the concepts associated with the traditional faculty roles may disappear. Faculty may stop being seen as guardians of the organized and stringent inquiry. Are we undermining authority of knowledge by taking these roles away from academic teachers? Possibly yes.

What elements of the old faculty role do we want to preserve? The one thing we want to preserve is the role of teaching. In a new way, through facilitation and responsiveness, faculty can preserve its teaching related authority. It is difficult to lecture online, but it does not mean that we cannot transfer knowledge and theoretical perspective online. In fact good, involved, high quality teaching may be even more important in the new environment then it was in the face to face teaching.

CHANGES IN THE ROLES OF STUDENTS

The identity and role of students also changes in online classrooms. Online learning involves a shift in who is responsible for learning. With less mediation between the student and the course material knowledge acquisition becomes much more the responsibility of the students.

There are several implications of this shift in responsibilities.

Design of online courses need to allow for students' more involved, constant, continuos, immersion in the course. Since online course materials can be accessed at any time, they need to support independent and self-paced learning. This means that quality of learning materials needs to carry some of the pedagogical functions that used to be fulfilled by students' interaction with face to face classroom faculty.

Online, responsibility for initiating discussions tends to shift to students. Course materials need to support this responsibility with comprehensiveness and presentation of multiple points of view. They need to give students a solid base of valuable discussion topics.

Online students become discussion initiators and moderators as well as discussion participants. Different skills will be needed to fill these roles and appropriate skill acquisition needs to become a part of all online programs. For example, teaching effective online communication, teamwork and collaboration needs to become part of the curriculum even for programs that are not directly teaching communication.

What do we gain by supporting these changing roles of students in online environments? In an online classroom students can afford more time to think and to craft responses. Online collaboration allows for a slow, shared work through texts. It gives everyone option to see how others think. Online classrooms can become places of true sharing of ideas, collaborative thinking and discovery. They can expose our students to multiple points of view and culturally different thinking. All these can happen if we allow for more student control over the learning process.

Of course, there are dangers to relinquishing faculty control over education. Student controlled instruction can lead to the lack of context and to diminishing quality of learning experience. With less control over what happens in the classroom teaching faculty need to make sure that they still provide context to what is being learned and that they effectively guide students through the course. What we do not want to loose in online classrooms is coherence of education and learning.

6. CHANGES TO COLLEGIATE CULTURE

These and other changes that online teaching and learning brings to education processes will cause significant changes to traditional collegiate cultures. Changing teaching practices, changing faculty and students roles will change academic institutions as we know them today.

As William H. Graves points out virtual universities will foster disaggregation and disintermediation of traditional educational models.[3] Structures of traditional universities will change to new, less compartmentalized models. A long tradition of differentiation among academic disciplines may be challenged as different departments are being forced to collaborate to survive.

On the other hand, since students will be able to choose educational institutions according to their interest rather then geographic proximity, universities will be pressed to specialize and focus their offerings at the institutional level.

In the process we may lose some traditional roles played by the academia. Academic institutions may stop being centers of inquiry and become centers for applied training and skills acquisition. Quality of teaching as opposed to traditional research focus will become more and more important in academic faculty evaluations. When students take control over educational process contact between academia and business may become much closer. Increased choice among universities should promote competition and that in turn should increase quality of academic offerings.

What will we loose by fostering this change in collegiate culture? We may loose academic focus in areas that are not easily applicable. Marriage of education

and business can have mixed efforts on program quality. There are gains to be gained if we start treating education as a business, but there are also loses if we limit education to business.

One aspect of the traditional academic culture that we may want to preserve is the authority of scientific and critical inquiry. The high quality value attached to any education may need special preservation efforts. Traditional safe guards of peer review and accreditation may need to be replaced by different, but equally strict norms of certifying academic validity.

7. CONCLUSION

Implementing change to important social concepts--such as education--requires careful consideration. Careful consideration means that we will pay attention to all, desirable and undesirable, aspects of the change we are implementing. Online learning and teaching already is a permanent feature of our educational landscapes. The time to ask difficult questions is now. Future of education may depend on how well we think through our answers.

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[1] John McDaid, a comment posted to a Media Ecology listserv discussion thread Re: Obsolete Universities, 5/11/00

[2] David Jaffe, "Institutionalized Resistance to Asynchronous Learning Networks", in Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks, Volume 2, Issue 2 - Sept. '98. Online at: http://www.aln.org/alnweb/journal/vol2_issue2/jaffee.htm

[3] William H. Graves, "Free Trade" in Higher Education - The Meta University". Online at: http://www.aln.org/alnweb/journal/issue1/graves.htm